

REFLECTIONS ON THE ARTIST
PORTRAITS AND SELF-PORTRAITS

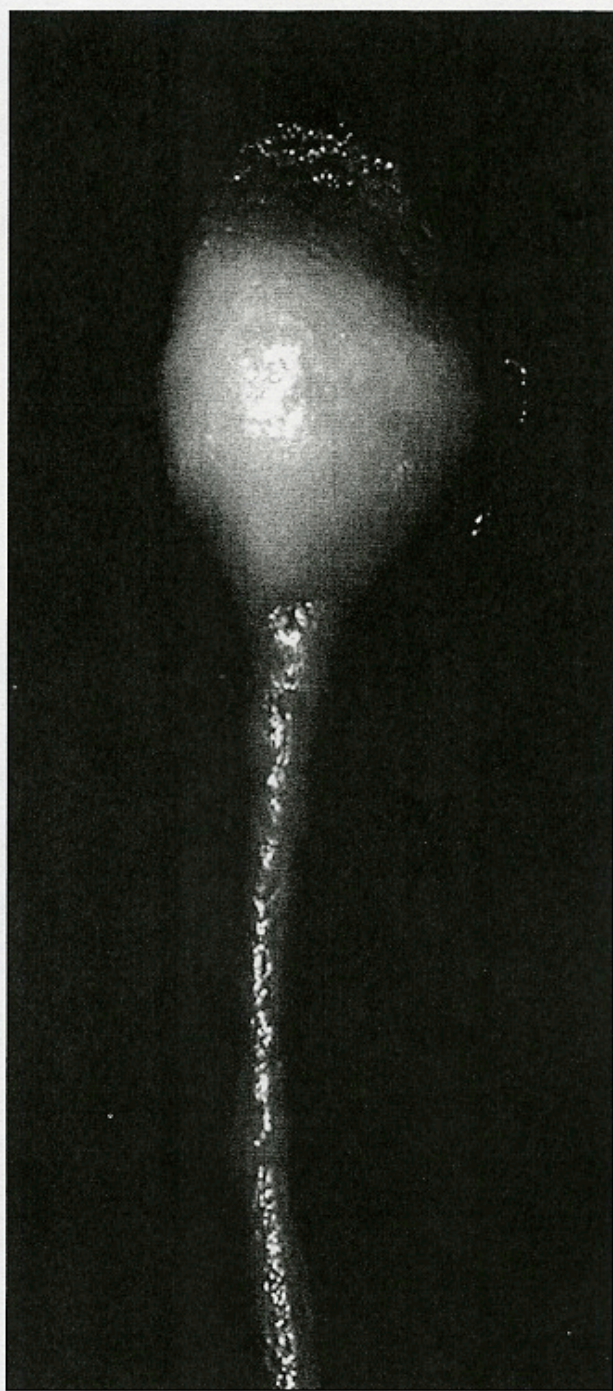
NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

GARY SCHNEIDER | GENETIC SELF-PORTRAIT

Gary Schneider has explored issues of identity since he began making self-portraits in 1974. Abandoning a conventional approach to portraiture, he is constantly rethinking, reworking, and pushing the parameters of what constitutes a photographic portrait.

In 1996 Schneider was commissioned to make photographs in response to some of the revolutionary discoveries that were emerging from the Human Genome Project.¹ Seizing the opportunity to combine a few of his longstanding passions (including biology and self-portraiture) Schneider embarked upon his most recent work, an installation of 55 photographs entitled *Genetic Self-Portrait*. In consultation with doctors and geneticists, Schneider culled diagnostic and forensic photographs – including x-rays, radiographs, photograms, and micrographs – of specimen samples of various parts of his own body. Schneider tended to select images that were visually eloquent rather than images that had been “adjusted” to provide the technician with clear and direct information. In a photograph of sperm, for instance, a luminous oval shape suspended on a fragile thread of beaded light appears to hover against a black ground. With a resemblance more akin to the botanical photographs of Karl Blossfeldt than to a medical document, Schneider’s interpretation of these “diagnostic portraits” lifts them from the realm of the prosaic to that of the poetic. Each of the scientific images selected was re-interpreted by Schneider according to its particular set of aesthetic concerns. All of the images were then enlarged so that the sizes of the elements that are presented are completely different from those of the originals.

Schneider’s installation also includes photographs influenced by his celebrated series *Handprints*. It was in



GARY SCHNEIDER, *SPERM* (detail), 1997,
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GARY SCHNEIDER, *SPERME* (détail), 1997
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creating this 1993 series that Schneider began to delve into the meaning and emotional power of the portrait and the self-portrait. Using two photogram negatives made of his own hands, Schneider crafted each print into a metaphoric or commemorative portrait of friends and family members, both living and dead. For *Genetic Self-Portrait*, Schneider pressed the palm of a hand, flecked with the sparkle of sweat, directly against a film plate. The film was then exposed to light and developed. Schneider's use of the photogram (a process that in this case might be more accurately described as an "autothermograph," since it was the heat and sweat of his hands that reacted with the film plate's emulsion) is a direct and extremely tactile method of making photographic prints without a camera or lens; it was inspired by the handprints found on the walls of the cave of Lascaux. Laden with associations – hands are guarantors of integrity and foretellers of fortunes – Schneider's hands and their intricate and unique variations form a kind of map of character and destiny.

While creating the installation *Genetic Self-Portrait*, Schneider was engaged in what he describes as "an uncharted journey into the unknown."² In fact, at the outset of the project, his supporters expressed some concern that the artist might not like what such an intimate investigation might reveal. Indeed, the "new biology" has allowed us to cross unprecedented boundaries: for example, geneticists can now identify certain markers for various diseases or predispositions to chronic conditions and even possibly for certain behavioural patterns. What we are left with at the end of Schneider's amazing "journey" is a radically new kind of portrait, one that reveals not only who the people represented are, but also what the future might hold in store for them.

1. The Human Genome Project, based in Bethesda, Maryland, is a thirteen-year effort coordinated by the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health to identify all the genes of the human body, to determine the sequences of the chemical bases that make up DNA, to store this information, to develop tools for analysis, and to address the ethical, legal, and social issues that result from such an investigation.
2. Gary Schneider in conversation with Lori Pauli, 12 April 1999.

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ENGLISH COVER:

GARY SCHNEIDER, *IRISES* (detail), 1997, CAMERA WORKS, INC.

FRENCH COVER:

EDWARD WESTON, *TINA MODOTTI* (detail), 1924, GIFT OF DAVID M. HEATH, TORONTO, 1973

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GARY SCHNEIDER | AUTO PORTRAIT GÉNÉTIQUE

Gary Schneider étudie l'identité humaine depuis 1974, époque où il commence à réaliser des autoportraits. Écartant l'approche traditionnelle, il n'a de cesse de repenser, de retravailler et de repousser toujours plus loin les limites du portrait photographique.

En 1996, il exécute une commande de photographies destinées à illustrer certaines découvertes révolutionnaires liées au Projet du génome humain¹. Il profite de l'occasion pour donner libre cours à quelques-unes de ses passions de longue date (dont la biologie et l'autoportrait) et attaque la réalisation de son œuvre la plus récente, une installation de 55 photos intitulée *Autoportrait génétique*. Consultant des médecins et des généticiens, Schneider sélectionne des photographies diagnostiques et médico-légales – notamment des radiographies, des photogrammes et des micrographies – représentant des échantillons de diverses parties de son propre corps. Son choix se porte davantage sur des images expressives plutôt que sur des épreuves déjà « retouchées » afin de transmettre aux techniciens des renseignements nets et précis. Ainsi, une photo de spermatozoïde présente une forme ovale lumineuse, suspendue à un fragile fil de lumière perlée, et qui semble planer sur un fond noir. L'interprétation que propose Schneider de ces « portraits diagnostiques » – plus près des photographies botaniques d'un

Karl Blossfeldt que de documents médicaux – les transpose du domaine du prosaïque au champ du poétique. L'artiste analyse chacune de ces images scientifiques à la lumière de ses propres considérations esthétiques. Par la suite, chaque image est agrandie de manière à gommer toute correspondance avec la taille originale des éléments présentés.

L'installation de Schneider intègre également des photographies influencées par sa célèbre série, *Empreintes*.



GARY SCHNEIDER, *MAINS*, 1997,
CAMERA WORKS INC.

GARY SCHNEIDER, *HANDS*, 1997
CAMERA WORKS, INC.